

Is County Council a full-time job? Voters will decide Nov. 7

■ But pay would not change — immediately; raises already approved for the new council

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In addition to electing a new County Council in November, Montgomery voters will decide whether to modify the county's charter with votes on two ballot questions.

Approval of the first question would make being a County Council member a full-time job; but pay and benefits would not necessarily change. The second question would set firm deadlines for the County Council to send approved laws to the county executive and for the executive to sign or veto laws. If approved, the amendments would take effect 30 days after the election.

With the first question, "voters should know that a yes vote for the amendment does not automatically equal a salary increase for council members," said County Attorney Marc P. Hansen. "The two are not related. The [Committee to Study the Compensation of the County Executive, County Council, Sheriff and State's Attorney] recommends council salaries and they have already been voted on for the next council."

The amendment also does not specify whether council members will be allowed to have outside employment. Most council members do not have another job, and many have long argued for the full-time designation. But some council members have held second jobs.

"Nobody thinks the council isn't a full-time job, and I have no problem paying people what they deserve and what is the fair market value," said Marvin Weinman, president of the Montgomery County Taxpayers

League. "The issue was how much work they could do on the side without it impacting their council job."

If the amendment passes, it would allow the compensation committee to recommend a council salary comparable to other full-time county employees and to full-time council members serving in comparable jurisdictions.

"The Charter Review Commission has struggled with this issue in the past," Hansen said. "The charter has always made it clear that council members were part-time workers, but it is well-known that they spend more than 40 hours a week doing their job. And the compensation committee felt constrained to recommend a salary based on full-time employment because the charter indicated they weren't."

Council members are now paid \$79,721 a year; the president is paid \$87,693. In November 2005, the compensation committee recommended a \$5,000 a year raise for council members in 2006 and 2007, with a cost-of-living adjustment in 2008 and 2009. The raise becomes effective Dec. 1.

The council approved the recommendation 8-1, with Councilman Howard A. Denis (R-Dist. 1) of Chevy Chase casting the dissenting vote.

The second ballot question is procedural and would give the county executive 10 days to approve or veto legislation from the council. The charter now allows the executive 16 days to notify the council of a veto.

A third ballot question recommended by county executive candidate Robin Ficker (D), requiring the council to lower property taxes if the piggyback tax was raised above 50 percent, was thrown out by a county Circuit Court last month. Ficker's amendment was originally rejected by the county council in August and was not considered for the November ballot.